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The Psychology of Youth Faith Formation

A care-giving faith?

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Abstract

The present study explores the individual differences in the experience of faith formation using the framework of attachment theory, as it looks at what inspires attachment behaviours toward God. The experience of faith formation is herewith conceptualised in this study as a care-giving experience, watered by reciprocity of proximity with a divine attachment figure. The findings suggest four individual pathways in which the faith of young people was formed. These pathways were seen as remedies for previous insecure attachment experience with unavailable human attachment figures, and as a means of enhancing an already positive attachment with human relational partners. In-depth interviews were conducted with fifteen Christian youths of various racial backgrounds who were active members of different church denominations in Stellenbosch, Western Cape, South Africa. The data collected from the respondents suggests youth faith formation as an attachment phenomenon.

Keywords

attachment theory – faith formation – correspondence models of faith formation – compensation model of faith formation – faith development

* The author is interested in psychotherapy and spirituality, and often found on the borderline between theology and psychology. His research interests coalesce, generally, around issues of psychotherapy and attachment, authenticity and identity formation, religion and place, African diaspora religions/spirituality, migration and spirituality, youth faith formation, and African diaspora mental health.

Introduction

It is argued in this paper that faith formation can best be understood from the lens of attachment. The attachment paradigm gives us some additional insights into the psychology of social relationships (cf. Bowlby 1988), as it describes the roles of relational partners and the process of interaction that facilitates bonds of affection during a relationship experience. Ainsworth saw attachment as the affectional bond that shapes “a relatively long-enduring tie in which the partner is important as a unique individual and is interchangeable with non-other” (1989: 711). This affectional bond propels a desire to maintain proximity to a relational partner that is perceived as an emotional anchor and a source of strength in times of difficulty. Kirkpatrick & Shaver (1990) first proposed that a deity or a divine entity can function as a relational partner for the religious believer. This proximity may be sustained over time, especially when the divine assures an attachment advantage, providing a safe haven, a secure base, and emotional meaning for the religious believer. However, attachment to a divine entity is often developed when there is no available human partner or caregiver to fill the void of attachment. Most attachment research therefore suggests a link between parental attachments and proximity to God or a transcendent being, focusing on the issues of faith communities in relationships with respect to faith formation as an attachment experience with God (cf. Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008; Davis, 2010; Counted, 2016). Hence, the researcher examines the experience of faith as an attachment between God and an individual, while answering what it is that binds both partners to a relationship, and in particular, how the attachment framework explains youth faith formation.

Fifteen Christian youths of various racial backgrounds living in Stellenbosch, Western Cape, South Africa, and between 18 to 35 years old¹ were recruited to participate in this study using semi-structured interviews based on a series of predetermined themes that were used when developing interview questions. Narrative analysis of the collected data yielded two essential elements that link young people of faith to the divine, as it relates to their faith formation experience. First, the respondents had experienced severe abandonment depression and attachment abuses from their early caregivers. This resulted in

1 This age bracket (i.e. 18 to 35 years old) does not suggest a definition of youth. Youth is a viewpoint, a community-in-transition, and an inclusive concept – it is not a strictly age-related group (for further readings, see: Nel 2000; Stech, 2016; Counted, 2016b). The researcher chose this age-group for ethical reasons, focusing only on young adults who have reached the age of consent (i.e. 18 years) in South Africa.

them seeking out new relationship experiences with God as they developed their faith as a caregiving practice for regulating the negative experiences of the past. Secondly, some of the respondents decided to experience God as a “security enhancing attachment figure” (cf. Mikulincer & Shaver 2004, p. 174) owing to their past experiences. Overall, the respondents developed their faith through four different pathways that amplify the ‘compensation’ and ‘correspondence’ models of attachment, as will be made clearer.

Attachment Theory and Faith Formation

Prior to the twilight of the twentieth century, psychological perspectives on faith development and experiences (cf. Erikson, 1968; Fowler, 1981) gave religious studies a new direction of scholarship, inspiring more research outputs looking at the area of psychology of religion. These studies were merely emphasising and reemphasising the models of psychoanalytic psychology and object relations theory (cf. Freud, 1940; Ainsworth, 1969; Rizzuto, 1979). The psychoanalytic theories of object relations later formed the foundational basis for attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Rizzuto, 2005). Attachment theory is popular in many instances because it is often used to refer to the mental representations of the self in relation to significant others. Attachment is developed during a parent–child relationship at the early stages of life. It remains active for a lifetime. The mental representations of the self are actively reflected in a child’s social relationships even into adulthood (cf. Bowlby, 1988; Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008; Davis, 2010). This cognitive framework is what Bowlby (1988) calls the internal working model (IWM). The IWM’s initially develop through childhood experiences with an early caregiver but often remain open to modification and specification across a lifetime through contact and dealings with attachment partners (cf. Bowlby, 1969, 1988; Siegel, 1999; Davis, 2010; Counted, 2016). Bowlby (1973) understood IWM’s as the image of one’s self, others, and self-with-others, given that the IWM’s of a person inform how they relate with others. IWM’s can be polluted with negative attachment contagion when having insensitive, abusive, and dysfunctional relationships. In order to deal with the negative attachment, the child then develops a coping mechanism that translates into self-reliance, distrusting of others, and other forms of coping styles exhibited during social relationships, even as they grow older (cf. Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978).

Furthermore, when the child grows up experiencing abusive relationships with their human or parental attachments, the child might seek out new relationships with a substitute attachment partner later on in life. Kirkpatrick and

Shaver (1990) refer to this as the ‘emotional compensation model’ of attachment. This is because the attachment system subconsciously motivates the child to maintain closeness with a significant figure that functions as a refuge in times of emotional need and distress (cf. Bowlby, 1973, 1982; Granqvist et al., 2010). Such a significant figure is seen as a new relational partner that serves as a substitute attachment figure (SAF). When God, for example, is perceived as a SAF, he functions as an affect-regulation tool (cf. Kirkpatrick, 1998; Davis, 2010), compensating for an unavailable or inaccessible human attachment figure (HAF). This can be a caregiver, parent, or a friend.

Alternatively, some may tend to model their previous attachment tendencies onto their new relationship with a SAF. This is often referred to as the correspondence model of attachment. It has three applicable individual pathways. The three individual pathways associated with the correspondence model of attachment development are the ‘socialised correspondence model’, ‘internal-working-model correspondence model’, and ‘implicit-relational-knowing correspondence model’ (cf. Kirkpatrick 1992; Kirkpatrick & Shaver 1992; Granqvist 1998, 2002; Granqvist & Hagekull 1999; Hall 2004; & Hall, Fujikawa, Halcrow, and Hill 2009). The main line of thought here is that a child’s internal working model (IWM) serves as the framework for experiencing future relationships.²

Part of the criterion for choosing a SAF is that the quality of care is controlled by the affective functions of the SAF. Relationships with SAF are maintained due to the attachment functions they provide in relation to a general set-goal. For example, from being a target for proximity, to acting as a safe haven for security, to being a response to experiences of loss and separation, and serving as a source of emotional strength and support in times of difficulty. These functions mirror the phenotypic representations of parental attachment experiences (cf. Granqvist, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2010; Counted, 2016).

There is no limit as to what an attachment may look like, nor who or what should be a substitute attachment figure. Mary Ainsworth (1989: 711) defines attachment as an affectional bond which shapes a “relatively long-enduring tie in which the partner is important as a unique individual and is interchangeable with none other”. A long-enduring tie between two relational partners is an indication of an attachment bond, and this can be the genesis of a new faith experience with God. Young people often develop such enduring bonds with God, marking a new relationship experience in their journey of faith.

2 Further explanation of the three individual pathways of correspondence models of attachment (i.e. the socialised correspondence, internal-working-model correspondence, and implicit-relational-knowing correspondence) has been provided in the findings and discussion section(s).

Therefore, a relationship with God, the transcendent, or a divine entity, can be developed as a positive enduring bond when there is no available or sensitive human attachment figure to fill the void of attachment. As a result, attached youths are likely to develop religious behaviours that draw them closer to God, and make them see the divine as a relational partner in their faith formation experience.

Consequently, given that the experiences between an early caregiver and a child have a profound effect on the way a child forms their faith as a youth, we can then propose that the youth faith formation experience is a care-giving faith, watered through a relationship with a divine attachment figure, and can also be the consequence of a youth's attachment experience with a caregiver. It is from this framework that the researcher has proposed the conceptualisation of faith formation as an attachment phenomenon – on the basis that the internal working models developed during parental attachment experiences are often the framework used to navigate future relationships.

Against this background, one can then offer that the experience of faith formation can be discussed as a care-giving interaction with a divine entity in relation to an early attachment experience. The early development of attachment is believed to be a gradual value-incorporation process that prepares the youth for a care-giving faith, as they grow to develop their faith and emotionally experience God (Moriarty, 2007; Counted, 2016). Such care-giving exchange allows a youth's experiences to submit to an inner psychological regulation that upends their faith experience (cf. Schafer, 1968).

Research Methodology and Philosophical Foundation

To explore how attachment theory can be used to explain faith formation experience, data was generated through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with fifteen male ($n = 8$) and female ($n = 7$) Christian youths of various racial backgrounds who were between 18 to 35 years old and are active members of different Church denominations in Stellenbosch, Western Cape, South Africa. The fifteen youths were purposefully selected for the qualitative study due to their participation in a quantitative survey ($n = 100$) conducted by the same researcher, although not reported on in this study.

The quantitative survey was completed with permission from church leaders responsible for the youths to measure their relationship with God using the *Attachment to God Inventory* (AGI) by Beck & McDonald (2004) to assess how the participants ($n = 100$) felt about their relationship with God. The AGI instrument is a 28-items scale measuring the attachment-anxiety and

attachment-avoidance orientations toward God. Higher scores in attachment-anxiety suggest that the participants are anxious about their relationship with God, while higher scores in attachment-avoidance show that the participants are avoiding God and do not seem to want a relationship with God. Each of the attachment-anxiety and attachment-avoidance subscales contain 14-items that have been hailed by Gibson (2006) and Hoffman (2000) as the strongest self-report instrument for measuring attachment with divine entities. By using the AGI instrument, the quantitative results identified the God-attachment orientations of the participants as it relates to their faith formation experience.

Autonomy was given to the participants to fill out the self-report survey in their own time in order to capture accurate responses from each participant. In some cases, surveys were collected on the spot while the researcher gave some participants time to fill out their surveys. Others were given permission to return the questionnaire the following week. Based on the summary of the quantitative study (cf. Counted 2017a, 2017b in press), it was observed that the faith experience of the participants was a case of God-attachment anxiety, 48%, rather than God-attachment-avoidance, 35%, in the AGI measurement. This means that the young people who took part in the survey were mostly anxious about their faith while maintaining proximity to God.³

The quantitative survey results inspired the qualitative follow-up interviews with fifteen purposefully selected respondents who were part of the quantitative study, and helped in formulating the objective of the qualitative study. Among other things, some of the research objectives formulated at the qualitative phase were to find out what led to their faith experience with God and what might be the source of their anxiety in relation to their personal relationship with God. The criterion for selecting the respondents for the follow-up

3 Other background information regarding the denominational affiliation of the participants in the quantitative phase shows that the majority of the youths, 41%, were from the Dutch Reformed Church. The second largest denomination in the study, 31%, was from the Roman Catholic Church. The third group consisted of participants who identified themselves as Pentecostal/Charismatic/Holiness church, comprising about 28%. Results also indicate that the majority of the participants, 57%, chose White African as their racial and ethnic group. However, this indication was fairly distributed for the Coloured African youths, 28%, who were the second largest racial group that took part in the survey. Next were the Black African (14%) and Indian African (1%) youths, who were substantially underrepresented in the sample. The gender composition of the participants appears to be evenly distributed among both gender groups. A larger percentage of females, 52%, took part in the research compared to 48% male participants. 87% of the participants claimed to be Christian natives or born to a Christian parent, while 13% claimed otherwise. Evidently, a huge percentage of the youths agree to have a Christian background.

interviews was their active involvement in youth groups in their respective churches, and their residency in Stellenbosch in Western Cape, South Africa. Their participation and scores in the survey was another important criterion. The first selected group of five scored higher levels of 'attachment-anxiety', the second group scored higher scores of 'attachment-avoidance', while the third group had secure/positive attachment with God, scoring lower levels of both the 'attachment-anxiety' and 'attachment-avoidant' subscales. Thus, five respondents from each of these three groups were purposefully selected for this study.

The respondents were interviewed between August 11, 2014 and August 20, 2014. For privacy and convenience, thirteen of the interviews were held in seminar rooms at the Carnegie Research Commons of the JS Gericke Library at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa. While at the discretion of two other respondents, interviews were done inside a McDonald's restaurant in Stellenbosch, South Africa. Interviews were face-to-face and lasted about 35 to 60 minutes per participant. Interview conversations were audio-recorded and later transcribed by the researcher. The interview transcription began after the final interview on August 20, 2014, and was completed September 7, 2014. The researcher also used handwritten notes during the interview sessions to identify and highlight important themes or keywords that are of particular importance to the study. Analysis of the collected data yielded several common features and themes that explain the experience of youth faith formation in relation to maintaining a relationship with God.

To enliven the curiosity of the respondents, the researcher shared information about himself as a member of the clergy in order to establish trust and mutual understanding. This was a worthwhile asset during the interview process, as it enabled the respondents to be at ease and allowed for an optimal flow of conversation, whilst maintaining privacy and confidentiality. This trust was important to encourage the respondents to open the door to their world and allow the researcher to extract meaning from their *lived* experiences, while finding out what might be impossible to observe. The respondents were then asked about their early childhood experiences, feelings of attachment insecurity, experiences of parental attachment, perceived experiences of faith, how they perceive God as their attachment figure (to read this in more detail, see, Counted, 2016), how their relationship with their parents may have influenced their faith experience, and what it is like to receive care from God and what his role is in the relationship.

The interview conversations brought to life the lived experiences of the respondents, offering a comprehensive integration and confirmation of

the theoretical models used. The contents of the open-ended questions consequently helped to elaborate on the faith formation experience of the respondents, whilst underpinning some elements of attachment theory. In order to avoid the risk of making the respondents identifiable, pseudonyms were used to assure confidentiality and anonymity during the data analysis (cf. Corden & Sainsbury, 2006: 22).

Before the data analysis was done, coding and selection of the overarching themes was completed via in-depth, line-by-line scrutiny of the interview scripts. This is what Glaser & Strauss (1967, pp. 101–116) refer to as the ‘constant comparison method’. This took the researcher several weeks as each of the interview scripts were transcribed and studied line-by-line to understand how the patterns of speech, keywords, phrases, analogies, and metaphors used by the respondents underscore their faith formation experience. The researcher paid attention to the commonalities of reasoning amongst the respondents as they talked about their faith and attachment experiences with God, allowing the researcher to compare how a particular statement may differ from a preceding or following statement (D’Andrade, 1995; Quinn and Strauss, 1997). Several themes resurfaced during this process, owing to the structural coding process adopted by the researcher to extract themes related to the central theory used for the study.

Whilst managing the qualitative data sets for further analysis, the researcher applied a series of structural codes to the data. MacQueen et al. (2007) describe “structural codes” as question-based, rather than theme-based, codes. In other words, this approach works for “data collected using structured or semi-structured interview or focus group guides that have discrete questions and probes that are repeated across multiple files in a data set” (Namey, Guest, Thairu, & Johnson, 2007: 140). Owing to this explanation, themes such as affectionate bonding, early abandonment, parental attachment, individual attachment differences, faith formation, and attachment-to-God were a series of structural codes that are of significance to this study. Hence, each interview question and its associated probes were assigned to a theme or code in a way that explains that particular code in each data file. This allowed the interview questions to comprise of attachment domains and themes that are relevant for the study.

To effectively undertake the structural coding implementation, analysis of the research data was achieved using a deductive approach to see how the experiences of the respondents amplify the attachment models and themes used in the study to conceptualise faith formation, while also noting new patterns of thought. The application of deductive analysis was complementary for

the data analysis procedure because the semi-structured interview questions were designed based on some selected themes/structural codes. The deductive approach used for the data analysis strengthens the overall results of the study since it is based on a predetermined structure and disallows any risk of reaching false conclusions. It is said that scientific enquiries that are based on inductive reasoning most often remain a myth (Popper 1959) and “untested” (Hyde, 2000: 84), since scientific knowledge cannot be generated through induction.

The most important way in which inductive knowledge grows is, precisely, by turning into deductive knowledge (Popper, 1959: 18). Therefore to transcend the confinement of “inductive scepticism” (Armstrong 1983, 52), the researcher will avoid been caught up in the intellectual entanglements of this debate and focus on the study at hand. Since knowledge is created by conjecture (Popper, 1963), the structure of the data analysis will be organised based on an established knowledge via undertaking a deductive procedure in the data analysis. Hence, the researcher first cited a theory or an attachment model, made observations using the cases, and then affirmed the model. Although most qualitative studies follow an inductive process and deductive approach commonly used in quantitative studies, there are, however, no set rules on this. Due to the scarcity of sources and risks associated with inductive scepticism in research, scholars like Hyde are of the opinion that the “adoption of formal deductive procedures can represent an important step towards assuring conviction in qualitative research findings” (2000: 82). Hyde (2000) therefore urges researchers to consider using a deductive approach in their qualitative data analysis due to its ability to reaffirm existing theories, demonstrate similarities or differences with data gathered from other studies in various contexts, and match patterns of thoughts, keywords, and themes central to the study via an applied data collection technique.

Results and Discussions: A Care-giving Faith Experience?

Based on the proposed theoretical framework for exploring youth faith formation as a care-giving process, it is then expected that early abandonment experiences, attachment inconsistencies, parental attachment experiences, and other attachment factors may influence the faith formation experience of the respondents in this study as they relate to God as their care-giver. As the researcher seeks to explain what binds young people in a relationship with God in the place of their parental or human attachment figures, it is further reiterated that due to the history of attachment experiences, be it positive or negative, the respondents may display some elements of the correspondence

and compensation models of individual attachment in their faith formation experience.

Compensation Model of Faith Formation

The *emotional compensation model* proposed by Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1990) simply suggests that extended experiences with early caregivers or human/parental attachment figures that are farfetched, unavailable, insensitive, or inconsistent lead to the development of negative IWMS of the self and AFs (cf. Kirkpatrick, 1992; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990). Kirkpatrick (1992), in his thesis, argues that the consequence of this attachment experience is a manifestation of intense attachment insecurity in relationships with AFs (cf. Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990, p. 315). The AF here is functionally used as an affect-regulation tool (cf. Kirkpatrick, 1998) to regulate and compensate for an unavailable or inaccessible AF. However, depending on necessity, a new AF substitutes for the emotional needs and regulates the emotional distress of the individual, in a way that assures security and safety. To illustrate this model clearly observations are made by narrating the experiences of young people who had emotionally abusive attachment experiences with previous attachment figures (especially parents and early caregivers) that were never accessible to them but had now formed a new relationship experience with God as a way of compensating for the experiences.

An Emotional Compensation Experience

Growing up as a teenager, Jerome's father had an alcohol problem, an addiction that would shift his son's attachment base. Jerome is passionate about his education and about making the best out of life. When Jerome was in Grade 11 and preparing for his Matric exams, it was expected that he would need the help of a caretaker to prepare for a major exam. Often, he craved the assistance of his father, whom he believed could help him with his schoolwork and give guidance and emotional support in preparation for his Matric exams. According to Jerome, the Matric exam will determine his acceptance into University. Sadly Jerome laments, "...at that time my dad was like having an alcohol problem."

According to Jerome, the unavailability of his father, traded for heavy alcohol consumption, grieved both himself and the mum who was sick at that time and was therefore also emotionally unavailable to him. The father's opprobrious drinking affected Jerome's academic performance in school. The mental trauma Jerome passed through at this time would soon cause him to look for a compensatory relationship with an available AF, who would compensate for his attachment "hunger". At this point of attachment desperation, Jerome admits that it...

...was big on me...because both of my brothers weren't there and lot of times I didn't know what to do when I did get home and then I would always ask my dad for help and you know he was not that father figure because I did get home and my dad will be drunk and sleepy and when he wakes up he doesn't say much – he just carries on drinking and sleeping and in that way.

Jerome's father's personal circumstances took a toll on Jerome as he turned elsewhere to find help (in the form of an attachment) to replenish the emotional abuse he suffered from his father. Jerome turned to God to satiate his relationship expectations. He did this using the interactive means of prayer to communicate with the *Transcendent* – a supposedly available but unseen SAF in order to gain relief and protection. For Jerome, this relationship with the divine was expressed using an attachment tool of communication – in form of prayer: "...through my prayer I didn't know where to turn to and I prayed a lot and thanks to God I am actually where I am today." Through prayer, Jerome was able to relate with God and develop his faith. This, he admits, contributed to the progress in his education today. As for Jerome, the proximity relationship with God through "prayer" served as a substitute for his attachment need for intimacy and security from his parents who were not there for him. This observation also confirms Granqvist's (2010) understanding of prayer as a tool for expressing an attachment in a believer-God relationship.

Julie's case is similar. She is stressed about pressure and criticism from her parents. This had created insecurity in her relationship with them. The constant criticism would soon make Julie disbelieve in her potential irrespective of how she felt on the inside. Although Julie acknowledged that her parents loved her, regardless, "I was pretty much on my own and was doing my own thing when I was growing up." According to Julie, the relationship difficulty she experienced with her parents was because she was "...a middle child and I actually had a lot of gifts God gave me and it was always criticised."

This led Julie to seek a proximity relationship with the divine, a different attachment figure that would regulate her emotional distress with her parents. Julie only realised that she was gifted when she started developing her faith and building a new relationship with her divine attachment figure who boosted her confidence. In her words, "I realised it (that she was gifted) when I actually started building my relationship with the Lord and seeking His truth and what he actually expects of me." For Julie, truth about herself and her gifting was far more important to her. Her parents seemed to deprive her of "ego trips" that could have affirmed her potential, and in a bid to compensate for this need, she wanted to relate to a SAF (in the person of God) which would aid

her need for self-affirmation, confidence, and emotional support. According to Julie, this new relationship with God comforts her more than anything else; this is a new *position* that images her new AF as a safe haven and secure base and one who would always believe in her potential.

June's attachment insecurity appears to be more 'disorganised' (cf. Main & Solomon, 1986). In one way she is fearful of close relationships, and in another, she dismisses close relationships. She admits,

I would say I have come a long way in my relationship with my mum and dad. I would tell you that it happened that my mum and dad happened to live in a farm and for few years we had drought and we almost got bankrupt. And my mother decided to go and work in London to support our family. She went when I was in grade 1 and she is still working there... so...yeah she is distant from me. But we communicate and we talk but it is not enough. And that is why I say I have been praying to God...when is the time going to come when... (June inhales deeply, trying to hold back tears). I feel sort of abandoned, and because of that I don't want people to get close to me.

June's abandonment experience during the formative years of her youth has formed an insecure IWM for exploring future social relationships. Her coping style is also through displaying some form of religious attachment, specifically through prayer, as was the case of Jerome. June's attachment difficulty has often caused her to drop to her knees in her new relationship with God. Depending on the circumstances, June is sometimes insecure in this new relationship, especially when she does not receive answers to her prayers. She speaks for herself:

I would describe my relationship [with God]...sometimes close, sometimes quite distant. It depends on what circumstances I have. And it depends on how busy I am. If I am busy I quite tend to distance myself from Him [and] when I have a few disappointments. I don't easily understand the stuffs that has happened and why it is happening. I have learned at least that it doesn't get better so when I don't get answers I tend to step back and try to do it myself.

Despite June's attachment insecurity, she wants her SAF (i.e. God) to be there for her more than anything. She admits, "Yes I am anxious about my relationship with God. I wanted to be stronger but I tend not to get there. I want to have this relationship...and get myself again. I am not there where I wanted to be – I

know it is important in one's life. I know what miracles He can do if he is in your life." June seems to have a *disorganised* attachment in her faith formation experience. She is avoidant and dismissing of God, as well as being fearful and anxious of God. Main and Solomon (1986) describe the *disorganised* attachment style as both "fearful" and "dismissing" in the sense that an individual is both suspicious and dismissive of close "others" because the individual expresses a feeling of self-reliance due to fear of being hurt while avoiding close relationships. The *disorganised* attachment style was best expressed by June: "I keep people distant from me...I won't trust people. I have a distrust of trusting people. Sometimes I fear they would judge me for what have happened in the past. If you get to know me I will get to know a lot about you but you won't know a lot about me."

Another case to consider in this regard is that of Adam. He is a Pentecostal youth who had a disturbing relationship with his caregiver while growing up. He blames himself for allowing his father to fall down the stairs of their three-storey building on Father's Day when he was trying to separate their neighbours from fighting. This incident led to his father's death. Adam believes this could have been averted if only he was more watchful over his father whose legs were amputated due to diabetes. That was a major turning point in Adam's life. In order to make up for the relationship he tragically lost, he converted to Christianity and developed his faith in God. This was with the view that a relationship with the Christian God would compensate for his tragic loss of a father figure. Adam is desperate for a father figure in his life. Adam narrates his story,

At that time I was not yet saved. I was looking for a "father" and that was part of the thing that led me to become a Christian, because at that time my mother uses to raise us alone. There was time when my grandmother said to us in midnight that we need to go [out of her house]. After that I sought after that love from a father. There came a time it was too heavy for us. God sent so many people to minister to me and I said Lord I am going to try and see if this is the way. And really I found that...He is the perfect Father. The perfect example of what a father should be.

Neville on the other hand was living with his mum when he was little, and according to him, "My mum and I had a decent life." When Neville was between 7 and 13 years old, he had his own fair share of life's tragedy. During this period, he was somewhat emotionally "abused" by his parents, and abandoned by his father who decided to live far away from his family. Neville complains,

I can't really talk to my father because he is only doing things his way. He kept me away from church because he is not the kind of guy that goes to places like that.... During that time my mum and dad separated and I went back home. My mum started drinking and that held back my life. Like I said, I didn't really think about God. I think it all started between my parents; if they took my life differently as their child things would be better.

An encounter with an aunty was the turning point in Neville's life. He narrates, "I went to my aunt one day in my primary schooldays to tell her about the abusive things I was experiencing in my life....and she took me in for all my primary school days. And at that moment I realised, why can't my dad help me like other kids. I want to get away from the situation." Eventually, Neville's "getting away from the situation" led him to encounter God after he left his family house to live on the streets during the divorce separation of his parents. This was an event that tore their home apart. While he was *walking* through the past shadow of his abandonment experience, he discovered a new AF in the person of God. He says, "...from that point, it was then I started going to church, started relating with the people in church, getting closer to God. I said to myself this is where I want to be." Neville's religious participation in church and relationships with his religious "others" seem to also play a huge role in his faith formation process.

Sharon has experienced similar negative attachment. Her mother had not wanted her as a child after she had experienced difficulty giving birth to her elder sister which required surgery. This traumatic experience made her mother vow not to have any child in the future. Her conception made her furious and often led her to speak against the child in her womb. Eventually Sharon was born. This "strange" parent-child relationship was skewed from day one. Subsequent to Sharon's compensation episode, she claimed that she had had a dream after a prayer session in her church, which revealed the strange situation surrounding her birth. On returning to their family house, Sharon confronted her mother about her past and her mother told her all about it. Sharon narrates herself:

My mum and I actually do not have that mum-daughter relationship. What happened is that... (She paused, drawing in a stuttered gasp and then forces herself to talk). When my mother was pregnant with my older sister she almost died and she said she did not want to be pregnant again. My mum and dad got married after a year...and they had me. And my

mum was pregnant with me and so she wished me dead. She was saying that... 'I don't want this child'. She was saying this and wishing that when she gives birth to me I must die... something like that. So some time... I think I was sixteen or seventeen, so I discovered... in my healing process... our pastor discovered something about me and in that healing process I discovered that I had a dream about me in my mummy's womb and I was struggling and I wanted to come out. And I asked my mum what happened and what this dream is about and then she told me what happened and how she felt. And so that affected our relationship [up until] now.

This "strange situation", according to the confession of Sharon's mother, started even before she was born. After her miraculous birth, she recalled what her mother told her: "that moment she [her mother] was breast feeding me and I turned my head... I didn't let her. So from day one we didn't gel." In order to *compensate* for the emotional insensitivity Sharon experienced as a child, she now embraces a new AF that would replenish her early *abandonment* experiences. She shares how she had reconciled with her past through building a new relationship with God who is now a target for her proximity seeking behaviours.

I made a commitment... I think when I was 13 years old... pastor started a community choir. But first my sister went, and then my mum went. We were all about 90 young children and we were all attending this choir group. I started loving the experience and up till today I am still standing today. In that emptiness that I felt I always say 'God I know you are going to fill this'. I spoke my heart out to God and I told God that he must help me through this because I can't handle it by myself. But what I know is that God must help me and he made me a stronger person. I made a decision and I said to myself am not going to let this limit me and am going to move forward and then God helped me through everything.

Another youth, Wendy, suffered abusive attachment from her parents. Her early attachment abandonment was caused by her parents' separation when she was a child, which she fears is a repetition of what is happening to her daughter now. Surprisingly, both Wendy and her daughter share a common early abandonment thread: "I was 10 years old when my dad left us to be with my mum's cousin and my oldest daughter was also 10 years old when my husband left me to be with another woman. And I am like, is this some kind of punishment?... the same thing is happening like a movie..."

However, it is only recently that Wendy decided to develop a relationship with a new AF: someone who would heal the wounds of her past and afford

her security and emotional support. She confirms: "For me I am converted to God now...and a lot of stuff happened." It seems that her new AF, in the person of God, is satisfying her attachment needs and lavishing her with some sort of emotional guardianship. From here she now explores the errors of her past, the abundance of life today, and an emerging hope in herself. In response to the role of her new AF in her life, Wendy has this to say: "When I took God into my life it was life changing. Like every Sunday, I was in church and I use to teach Sunday schools. Now I can encourage people, express myself to people, and talk to people to have God in their lives." For Wendy, her faith formation experience and new relationship experience with God has helped her cope with her emotional distress, allowing her the confidence to interact with people on spiritual and positive levels, sharing her testimony of faith in God. She claims, "I go to anybody at my workplace and talk about God and they would sit and would listen. Because for them is like wow...we didn't see you as this person." Wendy's experience is an indication that a compensation model of faith formation can bring about a positive experience of the self and the world around us.

Correspondence Models of Faith Formation

The correspondence model posits that an individual's attachment orientation with close *others*, usually caregivers or parents, serves as a cognitive model for forming their faith and relating with a divine entity. It is important here to understand how the cases identified in this section fit within the three correspondence models of faith formation.

An Internal-working-model Correspondence Experience

The *internal-working-model correspondence* proposition was led by Kirkpatrick and Shaver (1992: 25–62) who describe the condition of an entire IWM to correspond to both the embodied and disembodied relationship with a SAF. In other words, an individual's relationship orientation towards God is determined by their relationship with early caregivers (or other close others) on a correspondence level. Therefore, if youth A had a secure, stable, healthy relationship with his caregiver for example, youth A consequently will assume a similar orientation in his relationship with God. In contrast, having an insecure, unreliable, inaccessible, or unhealthy human attachment may mirror in *vis-à-vis* with a person's relationship orientation with God.

June's experience explained in the compensation model could also fall within this category. After considering her relationship with her parents as inaccessible and unreliable, she deals with this difficulty by withdrawing herself from any potential close relationship. This insecure attachment tendency is also exhibited in her faith formation experience as she tends to lean away

from God when she is faced with difficulties and perhaps does not get answers to her prayers immediately. Secondly, the way June is struggling to fix her relationship with her early caregiver (who has been unavailable to her since Grade 1 and lives thousands of miles away from her) is also reflected in her supposed new relationship experience, where she also struggles to maintain proximity with God: “Yes I am anxious about my relationship with God. I wanted to be stronger but I tend not to get there. I want to have this relationship... and find myself again.” June wished for a time when her relationship with her mother would be fixed, “when is the time going to come when... [I can reconnect with my mum]” – the same way she laments over her relationship with God. Thirdly, her feeling of abandonment by her caregiver is reflected in an eagerness to abandon her close *others*, even her DAF (i.e. God):

When I feel disappointment...I feel disappointed in myself...I distance myself from people and withdraw myself. When I distant myself from people I feel like I can stand on my own feet. I don't have to rely on somebody else, they can disappoint me in the future or like abandon me again. In my life I have a few disappointments. Sometimes I don't easily understand the stuffs that has happened and why it is happening. I have learned at least that it doesn't get better so when I don't get answers from God I tend to step back and try to do it myself.

It is interesting to discover that June's lamentation also falls under both the correspondence and compensation models. This confirms Hall et al. (2005) argument that empirical foundations that are used to support the emotional compensation model are likely to fall under the correspondence model, more or less. A single case can be used as a case study for both models.

The second case of an *internal-working-model correspondence* experience is that of Chris, a calm, down-to-earth, tough-minded Christian youth. Chris' secure attachment with his mother is mirrored in his emotional and theological reflections of God. Chris believes that he shares things in common with his mum. Both Chris and his mother always had a way of bonding, even far beyond the common forms of biology. Chris counts his strong emotional, career, and spiritual relationship with his mother, as a standpoint from which he engages his DAF (in the person of God) and forms his faith,

...with my mother we share the same interests. We find things to do together. We find it easier to connect with each other. She owns her own business which is IT related, and I am a programmer so a lot of times I can actually help her in her business. Or she can tell me what she discovered which is interesting to me as well.

Chris further narrates the internal-working-model correspondence experience very succinctly here:

The same way I do with my mum where I feel a connection in the things we share so I would feel a connection with God doing His work, being part of what he is doing at the moment. And also with the counselling and receiving counselling from God the same way I would have gone to my mother for counsel.

Chris' relationship orientation with his parental attachment is reflected in the way he chooses to relate with God, whom he considers stronger and wiser, the same way he perceives the mother – his first attachment figure. Chris' case best represents the internal-working-model correspondence example, where a SAF mirrors in on the same level with the relational attributes of an early caregiver.

A Socialised Correspondence Experience

The third model is the socialised correspondence experience by Granqvist (1998, 2002). Granqvist argues that extensive experiences with parents who are available, sensitive, responsive, and religious as opposed to those who are inaccessible and unreliable often lead to the development of positive IWMS of the self in relation to close *others*. This attachment posture often leads to a positive relationship experience with a SAF (Granqvist, 1998, 2002; Granqvist & Hagekull, 1999). Mikulincer and Shaver (2004) describe the role played by the SAF here as that of a "security-enhancing figure" (174).

Growing up with a mother has been so rewarding for Yebo, a 21-year-old youth. He believes that his mother's standards and way of relating with him has hugely influenced how he has developed his faith. The spiritual life of Yebo's mother is the cornerstone to his faith. He notes,

I trust my mum. She's been feeding me for 21 years now. Now I have to see certain stuffs that she told me and adopt standards of the kingdom of God. But sometimes the relationship with my mother affects my relationship with God positively and sometimes it can be negative. The first time when I got saved, and gave my life to the Lord it was just like...I was like asking myself 'where am I going when I die?' My mum is sure of where she is going when she dies. I don't want to be without her. I don't want to be in a place where she is not. That brought me closer to God and closer to acknowledge Him as my Lord and saviour.

Raised in the Christian faith, Yebo is concerned about reaching heaven and being close to God at all costs because of the faith of his mother, whom he wants

to also meet in the afterlife. His relationship with God assures him of this feat. As a result, God plays an important role in Yebo's life as a "security-enhancing figure" – an eschatological assurer – albeit in relation to the afterlife. On the other hand, one could suggest that Yebo's attachment experience is redolent of a double-barrelled security: one from his parental attachment figure (PAF) and the other from his divine attachment figure (DAF). However, his relationship with his PAF is leading him into a new relationship with a DAF and shaping his faith experience. Yebo's new relationship with the divine seems to suggest some kind of *eschatological* promise of security to reconnect with his PAF in the afterlife.

Sipho may have embraced a relationship with God because of the relationship he had with his religious mother. In trying to figure out how his relationship with God started, he reasons, "Maybe when I was a child...my mother made it a point that we go to church." While he acknowledged that his mother played a huge role in developing his faith at some point, he referred to a priest in his church as the archetype for his relationship with God. This priest, whom he looked up to during the formative years of his youth, played a much-more fatherly role in his life. He says, "...at a certain stage...I met somebody in my life that I really was like – this man – I really wanted to be like this man. And that was when I decided to be close to God." Sipho's faith experience is motivated by his human attachment figures. These two important people in his life led him to discover God for himself, thereby providing him with some extra security as he engages in the world around him.

An Implicit-relational-knowing Correspondence Experience

This last model proposed by Hall (2004) takes a more conciliatory approach. This is an outcome of the continuous, consistent mixed results that have emerged from studies on both the compensation and correspondence models. The implicit-relational-knowing correspondence experience gives substantial research support for all the three previous models (Davis, 2010). In reconciling the three previous models (i.e. emotional compensation model, internal-working-model correspondence model, and socialised correspondence model), Hall (2004) together with his colleagues (Hall *et al.*, 2009) proposed an all-encompassing model known as the implicit-relational-knowing correspondence experience. According to Hall (2004), this model unifies the earlier discrepant findings. In their proposition, Hall and his colleagues (2009) argue for the need for discretion to recognise how/when not to identify with AFs, in this case, a DAF. Hall *et al.* (2009) reason that people's experience with human attachment figures help them develop a "gut-level" knowledge to perceive how to interact with other specific relational partners, for example a DAF

(cf. Lyons-Ruth *et al.*, 1998 also pointed this out). This knowledge skill allows the youth to develop a corresponding implicit-relational-knowing faith with regards to relating with God. In other words, the relational bent is on an implicit level as opposed to an explicit religious functioning such as church participation, religious commitment, and so on, which does not possess an intrinsic loyalty. A youth within this category for example, who has a negative or positive attachment experience in the past tends to develop their faith and attachment to God regardless of their experience. Their faith experience is developed implicitly without necessarily devoting to an explicit religious or spiritual symbol (e.g. going to church).

Regardless of the early child experience, Hall and his colleagues are of the opinion that empirical foundations used to support the “emotional compensation model” could also be potential empirical narratives for understanding the implicit-relational-knowing correspondence experience (cf. Hall *et al.* 2005). For instance, the cases of Jerome, Julie, June, Neville, Sharon, and Wendy who had insecure relationships with their PAFs and at some point in their lives reported a sudden religious conversion, faith experience or attachment to God tendency following their interpersonal crisis, are good examples for illustrating Hall *et al.* (2005) implicit-relational-knowing correspondence model. This is because such re-arrangement seems to reflect the operation of characteristic affect-regulation strategies (cf. Hall *et al.*, 2005; Moriarty & Davis, 2008; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008).

In light of this, it is believed that cases cited earlier at the “emotional compensation model” support the theoretical underpinnings of the implicit-relational-knowing correspondence model (cf. Hall, Brokaw, Edwards, & Pike, 1998). The researcher concurs with this proposition because at some point, each of the respondents in the “emotional compensation” spectrum had some kind of implicit know-how to either relate to or dismiss any kind of religious form, independent of external and internal influences. They choose to relate with God and develop their faith by their own will. This intentionality in the place of forming a relationship with God triggered their faith formation experience. The respondents developed a relationship with the divine irrespective of their religious involvements and teachings or early childhood experiences and difficulties. Therefore, on these grounds, their faith formation experience was implicitly established.

Whilst the cases in the emotional compensation category could be used to discuss the implicit-relational-knowing correspondence model, the narrative of Maddie, a freshman Christian student at the University of Stellenbosch best describes this gut-level know how. Although Maddie has a secure attachment with her caregivers, regardless of this relationship, she chose to experience

God on her own since God was, for her, the only person that is “truly 100% understanding...there is nobody who knows you like He does.” Maddie continues,

I want to get close to God and have a perfect relationship – now – I realised how much I need him. Both of my parents are Christians so they motivated me to also be a Christian. They don’t force me to have a relationship with God.

Aside from being a good case example for explaining the implicit-relational-knowing correspondence model, Maddie’s experience also supports the “socialised correspondence model”. Her secure relationship with her “religious” parental attachment figures has motivated her to want the same kind of experience with God for herself. Maddie realised how much she needed God on her own, independent of the social and physical “aromas” of spirituality emitting from her PAFs. The researcher therefore considers Maddie’s case as a good addition to the little empirical research on Hall *et al.* (2005) correspondence model because of her gut-level decision to relate with God on her own and develop her faith more effectively than ever before.

Limitations and Further Study

There were few limitations to the study. First, the researcher combined the “results” and “discussion” in order to summarise the foregoing points in the paper, even though the standard structure for research articles is to present an introduction, methods, results, discussion and conclusion. However, this approach was undertaken because the results needed to be discussed as they were presented and it can be challenging sometimes to fit qualitative studies into a standard mould (cf. Pitchforth, Porter, van Teijlingen & Keenan, 2005).

Secondly, some qualitative researchers might question the use of deductive approach in the data analysis procedure since a deductive approach does not accommodate themes that are irrelevant to the central theory used for the study. Although using an inductive analytical method might have brought a different perspective to the study, there are no strict right or wrong analytical procedure for conducting empirical research. Therefore, the researcher decided to stick to the deductive analytical method in order to construct the structural codes of analysis and interview questions based on an established knowledge. However, a new study that looks at youth faith formation from the investigative lens of attachment theory using an inductive analytical method would be a great follow-up to this study.

On a final note, taking a quantitative approach to examining youth faith formation in relation to a range of variables like gender, education level, religious, and social backgrounds would add a valuable stock to this study. Also, a very important study-investment as a follow-up to this study would be to explore other population of Christian youths to see how they develop their faith using the attachment models proposed in this study.

Concluding Remarks

A sense of attachment resonates with most of us, and as a result, we relate to our close “others” as attachment figures due to our cognitive framework (known as the internal working models) for exploring social relationships and the world around us. Ultimately, the respondents have provided stand-up, real-life narratives for the latest empirical staple for attachment theorists’ diet as we consider the subject of youth faith formation as a care-giving process. A care-giving faith is therefore a pattern of youth attachment behaviour towards God in which the youth emphasises the importance of giving care and emotional support in their faith experience. As seen in the case examples, attachment experiences with early caregivers/parents had established the internal working models that influence the potential of future relationships among the respondents. This cognitive framework for exploring potential relationships was seen regulating the respondents’ attachment system as they assume both a “compensatory” and “corresponding” functionality, whilst forming their faith and developing a relationship with God based on their previous attachment experiences. More specifically, the compensation and correspondence individual-attachment models have helped us to explore the experience of faith formation holistically and psychologically as a care-giving faith.

Furthermore, the framework used to carry out this study has given the experience of faith formation a psychological meaning – as a relationship with a divine attachment figure and the consequence of attachment experiences with a parent/caregiver. This proposition has helped the researcher to see how young people form their faith by exploring a relationship with the divine in relation to the attachment void (or experience) they want to fill/satisfy. As a result, most of the youths reported disruptive attachment experiences with their human attachment figures which made them to seek out for a new relationship with the divine, as a way of compensating for the difficult relationships they’ve had in the past with previous attachment figures. On the contrary, some of the youths decided to explore a relationship with the divine for the sake of enhancing their need for security, and not because they were

having (or had) an insecure attachment experience with their previous/current AF.

However, the process of faith formation was not as easy as the researcher had thought. Some of the youths in the study also reported negative relationship experiences with their new substitute attachment figure (i.e. God) while others seemed to be enjoying a healthy and positive relationship with God (see in another study for reading: Counted, 2016). Notwithstanding, the research questions were addressed in a way that constructed a composition of how young people develop their faith. The constructed narrative both supported and elaborated the compensation and correspondence models of attachment theory, and can serve as an empirical foundation for future studies on youth faith formation.

Regardless, this research invites church leaders to understand the complexities associated with the care-giving faith of their young members, who draw close to God because he is perceived as some kind of attachment figure. It is the role of church leaders to disciple their young, fragile members to see God as more than just a mere attachment figure, or a temporal solution to their need for a meaningful attachment bond. Frankly, we should help nurture their faith to the extent that they come to the reality of experiencing God and drawing close to him because he is more than just a transient remedy to their emotional needs. Such realisation will propel the youth to see their proximity to God as one that enriches the spirit and soul, enabling them to be set apart as the 'light of the world' and 'salt of the earth' for God's ultimate agenda in a dysfunctional world.

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